

Fresno will take a bite at Bulldogs problem

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By JEFF JARDINE
BEE LOCAL COLUMNIST
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Fresno Mayor Alan Autry and Police Chief Jerry Dyer find it disgusting that youngsters there can't wear their favorite Fresno State football or basketball player's jersey around town without being suspected of being a gang member.

Fresno's largest and most violent gang, the Bulldogs, pilfered its name from the university's sports program. Add identity theft to the gang's long list of crimes, the mayor contends.

"They've hijacked the mascot of the local university," said Autry.

The predominantly Latino gang's 4,000-plus documented members and 6,000 wanna-bes wear Fresno State clothing as their trademark, like the Norteños flash red and the Sureños blue. The Bulldogs are affiliated with neither gang. They're their own collective monster.

More than stealing the name, they've wreaked havoc upon the city for two decades. They've committed rapes, aggravated assaults, murders, kidnappings and robberies. A Bulldog shot a Fresno police officer last July, nearly killing him. They frequently prey on unsuspecting and vulnerable citizens.

"We've had lots of street robberies where innocent people got hurt," Dyer said. "You'd be walking down the street and four or five guys would jump out a car and attack somebody."

Why should readers in Modesto care about what's happening in Fresno? Because gang activity is prevalent throughout in this state. What happens in Fresno is also happening here in some form. We've endured a ridiculous amount of gang-related killings, robberies, thefts and other crimes at great costs in every respect.

So if they find something that works in Fresno, we'd be foolish not to try it here, too.

That's why Modesto Mayor Jim Ridenour and Police Chief Roy Wasden are watching Fresno's effort to crush the gangs. And they're monitoring Fresno's attempts to make the necessary social changes by giving bangers a way out of gangs and to prevent kids from joining gangs in the first place.

Ridenour and Wasden attended a gang summit in Fresno in December, and Ridenour will host a conference for Central Valley mayors here in June. Fresno's programs — its successes and failures — will be a topic of discussion. The successes will no doubt be used in an effort Ridenour plans for Modesto. He will ask parents, educators, faith-based organizations, nonprofits and other community groups to get more involved with the city's youth to stymie gang recruitment and create an atmosphere where kids can leave the gangs.

There are 4,171 documented gang members in Stanislaus County, according to Rick Armendariz, a Modesto police sergeant attached to the multi-agency Central Valley Gang Impact Task Force.

Suppression and rehabilitation

Fresno's two-pronged attack — the suppression of gangs by police and the rehabilitation programs spearheaded by Autry — could become the model for other cities, Wasden said.

"We'll say freely that (police are) not the solution," Wasden said. "We can turn down the violence and buy time for the community. But as we do that, if we don't have fundamental changes and address the reasons, we're not going to change anything. We have to disrupt the cycle."

The mind-set in Fresno, too, needed to change, Autry said. He and Dyer were tired of the Bulldogs having their way with the city. So Dyer devised Operation Bulldog, assigning a group of officers to do nothing but hunt down Bulldog gang members. He named the unit the Bulldog Tactical Team.

Other cops on the street were told to make the Bulldogs their priority, too. Since mid-November, they've put 1,000 Bulldogs in jail on felony charges, Dyer said. As a result, authorities gained a greater understanding of just how much damage the Bulldogs were doing.

Recording their statistics in 28-day periods, police found that violent crimes in the central and south parts of the city fell 66 percent from the first period to the second. Overall, violent crimes in those areas have dropped 34 percent since Operation Bulldog began, he said.

Help for those who want out

While the police concentrated on suppressing the Bulldogs, Autry focused on the aftermath through his Mayor's Gang Prevention Initiative. Autry believes convicted gang members need a reason not to return to the gangs when they get out of prison, and that kids need a reason not to join gangs in the first place.

So he's earmarked \$1.1 million to provide services — educational and job opportunities, anger management and drug counseling and tattoo removal among them — to those who want to extricate themselves from the gangs.

If it works, and noticeable numbers of gang members go straight, then other cities will follow the model. If it doesn't, it will go on the scrap heap with dozens of other well-intentioned, humanistic plans.

Ultimately, success will be measured in a young fan's ability to wear Fresno State garb — or anything red or blue — without fear of arrest or gang retaliation.

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